

Abstract 476

TITLE: Methods Used in Determining Risks, Needs and Prevention Barriers Encountered by Commercial Sex Workers in Louisiana

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BACKGROUND: The Needs Assessment Committee (NAC) of the Statewide HIV Prevention Community Planning group was charged with identifying the risks, needs, and prevention barriers of Louisiana’s eight prioritized target populations. After reviewing existing data sources, it was determined that throughout the state, information was incomplete on one population: commercial sex workers. In August 1998, the NAC began the process of implementing focus groups in regions throughout the state to obtain more information about this particular target population.

METHODS: Six regions in Louisiana were identified as feasible and appropriate to conduct focus groups. The participants for the focus group and the setting to conduct the group would be organized by a CBO selected within that region. Members of the NAC collectively devised a focus group guide to address three main areas of interest: risks, needs and barriers for HIV prevention. NAC decided to select focus group facilitators who matched both the target audience in respect to race and gender, and who had a familiarity with prevention programs in Louisiana. Training for focus group facilitators was conducted to include the selected facilitators as well as other interested individuals. The guide was pretested once and revised prior to use.

RESULTS: Between December 1998 and February 1999, five focus groups were conducted in five regions throughout Louisiana. There were a total of 47 participants, of whom 84% were African American and 86% were female. A majority (52%) of the participants were 35 years or older. In addition to unprotected sex, many of the focus group participants listed addiction to alcohol or drugs as being a major risk for contracting HIV. Prevention barriers faced by commercial sex workers include: fear of violence from their clients, and men who pay more for a sexual encounter when a condom is not used. The participants identified many needs in receiving prevention information, including peer counselors, outreach workers getting out into the community, and free access to needles and condoms.

CONCLUSIONS: Focus groups proved to be a relatively low-cost and effective means of collecting information on a target population who have been underrepresented in statewide research. CBOs funded by the state were an important link to identifying commercial sex workers who would be willing to participate in the groups. Prevention efforts geared towards CSWs should include information and referrals for substance abuse, and outreach workers should be well informed about the correlation between addiction and HIV transmission.

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